MediaLit KIT™

Five Key Questions of Media Literacy

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1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently than me?
4. What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

Five Core Concepts

1. All media messages are 'constructed.'
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

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#1

Key Question #1

Who created this message?

Core Concept #1

All messages are 'constructed.'

Keyword:

Authorship

Guiding Questions:

- **What kind of "text" is it?**
- **What are the various elements (building blocks) that make up the whole?**
- **How similar or different is it to others of the same genre?**
- **Which technologies are used in its creation?**
- **What choices were made that might have been made differently?**
- **How many people did it take to create this message? What are their various jobs?**

To explore the idea of 'authorship' in media literacy is to look deeper than just knowing whose name is on the cover of a book or all the jobs in the credits of a movie. *Key Question #1* opens up two fundamental insights about all media – "*constructedness*" and *choice*.

The first is the simple but profound understanding that media texts are not "natural" although they look "real." Media texts are built just as buildings and highways are put together: a plan is made, the building blocks are gathered and ordinary people get paid to do various jobs.

Whether we are watching the nightly news, passing a billboard on the street or reading a political campaign flyer, the media message we experience was written by someone (or probably many people), images were captured and edited, and a creative team with many talents put it all together.

The second insight is that in this creative process, *choices are made*. If some words are spoken; others are edited out; if one picture is selected, dozens may have been rejected; if an ending to a story is written one way; other endings may not have been explored. However as the audience, we don't get to see or hear the words, pictures or endings that were rejected. We only see, hear or read what was accepted! Nor does anybody ever explain why certain choices were made.

The result is that whatever is "constructed" by just a few people then becomes "normal" for the rest of us. Like the air we breathe, media get taken for granted and their messages can go unquestioned. Media are not "real" but they affect people in real ways because we take and make meaning for ourselves out of whatever we've been given by those who do the creating.

The success of media texts depends upon their apparent naturalness; we turn off a TV show that looks "fake." But the truth is, it's all fake – even the news. That doesn't mean we can't still enjoy a movie or sing along with a favorite CD or tune in to get the news headlines.

The goal of *Key Question #1* is simply to expose the complexities of media's "constructedness" and thus create the critical distance we need to be able to ask other important questions.

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#2

Key Question #2

What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

Core Concept #2

Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.

Keyword:

Format

Guiding Questions:

- **What do you notice… (about the way the message is constructed)?**
  - **Colors? Shapes? Size?**
  - **Sounds, Words? Silence?**
  - **Props, sets, clothing?**
  - **Movement?**
  - **Composition? Lighting?**
- **Where is the camera? What is the viewpoint?**
- **How is the story told visually? What are people doing?**
- **Are there any symbols? Visual metaphors?**
- **What's the emotional appeal? Persuasive devices used?**
- **What makes it seem "real?"**

The second *Key Question* explores the 'format' of a media message and examines the *way* a message is constructed, the creative components that are used in putting it together – words, music, color, movement, camera angle and many more. The goal of *Key Question #2* is to help students build an internal checklist that they can apply to *any* media message *anytime*.

To build this checklist, we have to, first, begin to *notice* how a message is constructed. Through the activities in this unit, students will grow in understanding how all forms of communication – whether magazine covers, advertisements or horror movies – depend on a kind of "creative language": use of color creates different feelings, camera close-ups convey intimacy, scary music heightens fear.

"What do you notice. . .?" is one of the most important questions to ask in the media literacy classroom. And, of course, all answers are acceptable because different people notice different things. (More about this in *Key Question #3*.)

Because so much of today's communications, including the news, comes to us visually, it is critical that students learn the basics of visual communication – lighting, composition, camera angle, editing, use of props, body language, symbols, etc. – and how the use of these techniques influences the various meanings we can take away from a message. Understanding the grammar, syntax and metaphor system of media, especially visual language, not only helps us to be less susceptible to manipulation but also increases our appreciation and enjoyment of media as a constructed "text."

Just as writing improves not only one's reading skill but also one's appreciation for good writing, the best way to understand how media are put together is to do just that – make a public service announcement, create a website, develop a marketing campaign for a school activity. The more real world the project is, the better. Digital cameras and computer authoring programs provide easy ways to integrate creative production projects in the classroom from writing and illustrating their own stories in kindergarten to creating a personal video documentary in the upper grades.

The four major arts disciplines – music, dance, theatre and the visual arts – can also provide a context through which one gains skills of analysis, interpretation and appreciation along with opportunities to practice self-expression and creative production.

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Key Question #3

How might different people understand this message differently from me?

Core Concept #3

Different people experience the same media message differently.

Keyword:

Audience

Guiding Questions:

- **Have you ever experienced anything like this in *your* life?**
- **How close is this portrayal to your experience?**
- **What did you learn from this media text?**
- **What did you learn *about yourself* from experiencing the media text?**
- **What did you learn from other people's response? From their experience of life?**
- **How many other interpretations could there be? How could we hear about them?**
- **Are other viewpoints just as valid as mine?**
- **How can you explain the different responses?**

How do audiences interact with the media in their lives? Our bodies may not be moving but in our heads, we're constantly trying to connect what we're hearing, seeing or reading with everything else we know. *Key Question / Core Concept #3* incorporates two important ideas: first, that our *differences* influence our various interpretations of media messages and second, that our *similarities* create common understandings.

When you think about it, no two people see the same movie or hear the same song on the radio; even parents and children do not "see" the same TV show! Each audience member brings to each media encounter a unique set of life experiences (age, gender, education, cultural upbringing, etc.) which, when applied to the text – or combined *with* the text – create unique interpretations. A World War II veteran, for example, brings a different set of experiences to a movie like *Saving Private Ryan* than a younger person – resulting in a different reaction to the film as well as, perhaps, greater insight.

The line of questions in *Key Question #3* turns the tables on the idea of TV viewers as just passive "couch potatoes." We may not be conscious of it but each of us, even toddlers, are constantly trying to "make sense" of what we see, hear or read. The more questions we can ask about what we and others are experiencing around us, the more prepared we are to evaluate the message and to accept or reject it. And hearing multiple interpretations can build respect for different cultures and appreciation for minority opinions, a critical skill in an increasingly multicultural world.

Our similarities are also important to understanding how media makers "target" different segments of the population in order to influence their opinion or, more typically, to sell them something. The concept of "target audience" will be explored more deeply in *Key Question #5.*

Finally, exploring this question reminds teachers that they must not only be open to various interpretations among their students but also that students and teachers don't experience the same media the same way, either! The goal of media literacy is not to ferret out one "right" interpretation that resides in the head of the teacher but rather to help students think through the "constructedness" of a media message and then substantiate their interpretation with evidence.

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#4

Keyword:

Content

Guiding Questions:

- **What kinds of behaviors / consequences are depicted?**
- **What type of person is the reader / watcher / listener invited to identify with?**
- **What questions come to mind as you watch / read / listen?**
- **What ideas or values are being "sold" to us in this message?**
- **What political ideas are communicated in the message? Economic ideas?**
- **What judgments or statements are made about how we treat other people?**
- **What is the overall worldview of the message?**
- **What ideas or perspectives are left out? How would you find what's missing?**

Key Question #4

What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

Core Concept #4

Media have embedded values and points of view.

In looking at the content of a media message, it is important to understand that there are no value-free media and never will be. All media carry subtle messages about who and what is important.

Because all media messages are constructed, choices have to be made. These choices inevitably reflect the values, attitudes and points of view of the ones doing the constructing. The decision about a character's age, gender or race mixed in with the lifestyles, attitudes and behaviors that are portrayed, the selection of a setting (urban? rural? affluent? poor?), and the actions and re-actions in the plot are just some of the ways that values become "embedded" in a TV show, a movie or an ad. Even the news has embedded values in the decisions made about what stories go first, how long they are, what kinds of pictures are chosen, and so on.

Sometimes, like us, media makers are careless and turn a generalization (a flexible observation) into a stereotype (a rigid conclusion). We should expect them, however, to strive for fairness and balance between various ideas and viewpoints. But we also need to know how to locate alternative sources of both news and entertainment and to be able to evaluate the alternatives as well for their own embedded values.

What's significant about *Key Question / Core Concept #4* is not that ideas and values are embedded in media messages but that the values of mainstream media typically reinforce, and therefore, affirm, the existing social system. This explains two of the major complaints many people have about media: 1) Less popular or new ideas can have a hard time getting aired, especially if they challenge long-standing assumptions or commonly-accepted beliefs; 2) Unless challenged, old assumptions can create and perpetuate stereotypes, thus further limiting our understanding and appreciation of the world and the many possibilities of human life.

If we have the skills to question and rationally identify both overt and latent values in a mediated presentation, whether from the news, entertainment – or now especially from the Internet – we are likely to be much more astute in our decision-making to accept or reject the overall message. That's vital for effective citizenship in a democratic society.

Being able to recognize and name missing perspectives is also a critical skill as we negotiate our way *each day of our lives* through an increasingly multicultural world.

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Keyword:

Purpose

Guiding Questions:

- **Who's in control of the creation and transmission of this message?**
- **Why are they sending it? How do you know?**
- **Who are they sending it to? How do you know?**
- **What's being sold in this message? What's being told?**
- **Who profits from this message? Who pays for it?**
- **Who is served by or benefits from the message**
  – the public?
  – private interests?
  – individuals?
  – institutions?
- **What economic decisions may have influenced the construction or transmission of this message?**

Key Question #5

Why is this message being sent?

Core Concept #5

Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

With *Key Question #5*, we look at the *motive* or *purpose* of a media message – and whether or how a message may have been influenced by money, ego or ideology. To respond to a message appropriately, we need to be able to see beyond the basic content motives of *informing*, *persuading* or *entertaining.*

Much of the world's media were developed as money making enterprises and continue to operate today as commercial businesses. Newspapers and magazines lay out their pages with ads first; the space remaining is devoted to news. Likewise, commercials are part and parcel of most TV watching. What many people do not know is that what's really being sold through commercial media is not just the advertised products to the audience – but also the audience to the advertisers!

The real purpose of the programs on television, or the articles in a magazine, is to create an audience (and put them in a receptive mood) so that the network or publisher can sell time or space to sponsors to advertise products. We call this "renting eyeballs." Sponsors pay for the time to show a commercial based on the number of people the network predicts will be watching. And they get a refund if the number of actual viewers turns out to be lower than promised. Exploring how media content, whether TV shows, magazines or Internet sites, makes viewers and readers of all ages receptive target audiences for advertisers creates some of the most enlightening moments in the media literacy classroom.

Examining the purpose of a message also uncovers issues of ownership and the structure and influence of media institutions in society. Commercially sponsored entertainment may be more tolerable to many people than, say, a commercial influence over the news. But with democracy at stake almost everywhere around the world, citizens in every country need to be equipped with the ability to determine both economic and ideological "spin."

But there's more. The issue of message motivation has changed dramatically since the Internet became an international platform through which groups and organizations – even individuals – have ready access to powerful tools that can persuade others to a particular point of view, whether positive or negative. The Internet provides multiple reasons for all users to be able to recognize propaganda, interpret rhetorical devices, verify sources and distinguish legitimate websites from bogus, hate or hoax websites.

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